Assistive Listening Devices for People With Hearing Loss

A Guide for Performing Arts Settings

The Kennedy Center
THE JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

The Kennedy Center

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The Kennedy Center

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts has long been in the forefront of reaching out to and making the performing arts accessible to people with disabilities. In addition, it has a strong commitment to creating innovative and effective educational programs, models, and tools for the arts community. Melding these two drives together, the Kennedy Center has launched a new initiative to create a series of practical guides about accessible and universally usable arts programs and facilities.

With 54 million potential theater-goers with disabilities 24 million of whom are deaf or hard of hearing, the Kennedy Center recognizes that providing access is not only a mandate of Federal law, it is also an asset to be valued in bringing new audiences and keeping audiences is their lives change.

The Kennedy Center realizes that work to ensure that programs, performances, events, and facilities are fully accessible to people with disabilities is ongoing. We are eager to find solutions to challenges and to share these solutions with others in the field of arts and accessibility. We hope that this guide will be of use to you and steer you towards the ultimate goal of making the arts accessible to everyone in our community.

Sincerely,

Derek E. Gordon, Vice President
Education Department

Part I

To Begin

Include the Community
Know Your Legal Obligations

It is always wise to include knowledgeable people with disabilities in an advisory capacity when purchasing or providing accommodations that will serve them. Your state, county, or city may have a commission, council or service center of the deaf and hard of hearing where you can get recommendations about the best assistive listening devices for your venue and referrals to vendors or a technical resource center where you can examine and try out the equipment.

Check with local or national chapters of organizations that provide services to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing such as:

Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc.
7910 Woodmont Avenue, Suite 1200
Bethesda, MD 20814
301-657-2248 Voice
301-657-2249 TTY
301-913-9413 Fax
Email: national@shhh.org
Web Site: www.shhh.org

Association of Late-Deafened Adults, Inc. (ALDA)
1145 Westgate Street, Suite #206
Oak Park, IL 60301
877-348-7537 Voice/Fax
708-358-0135 TTY
Web Site: www.alda.org

Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
3417 Volta Place, N.W.
Washington, DC 20007-2778
202-337-5220 Voice
202-337-5221 TTY
202-337-8314 Fax
Email: info@agbell.org
Web Site: www.agbell.org/index.html

National Association of the Deaf
814 Thayer Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910
301-587-1788 Voice
301-587-1789 TTY
301-587-1791 Fax
Email: info@nad.org
Web Site: www.nad.org

Know Your Legal Obligations

Many theaters and performance venues are unaware of their exact legal obligations to provide effective communication for patrons who are deaf or hard of hearing. Effective communication includes, but is not limited to, such things as assistive listening devices (ALDs). To figure out whether or not your theater is required to have a permanently installed assistive listening system under the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), answer the following questions:

1)	Does the theater have fixed seats? (seats that are not intended to be removable)	yes	no
2)	Does the theater accommodate 50 or more patrons?	yes	no
3)	Does the theater have an audio amplification system?	yes	no

If the answers are "yes" to #1 ***and*** "yes" to ***either*** #2 or #3, then the theater is legally obligated to have a permanently installed assistive listening system. Otherwise there must be enough electrical outlets to accommodate the use of a portable system.

Additional requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act Architectural Guidelines (ADAAG) are the number of receivers and signs. If you are required to have a permanently installed system, then you must have 4 receivers for every 100 seats in your theater. You are also required to post signs with the international symbol of access for hearing loss to notify your patrons that the assistive listening devices are available. Although the ADAAG does not tell you where you must post these signs, it makes sense to

Assistive Listening Equipment Available

sample sign

To Begin

have signs in highly visible and prominent areas such as at your box office, near the main entrance or front door, in the theater lobby, and at the location where the receivers are distributed.

For technical assistance or to get the complete Americans with Disabilities Act Architectural Guidelines (ADAAG) contact:

The Access Board

1331 F Street, NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20004
(800) 872-2253 Voice
(800) 993-2822 TTY
Email: info@access-board.gov
Web site: www.access-board.gov

The Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTAC)

To contact the DBTAC closest to you call (800) 949-4232 (voice/TTY) or visit www.adata.org

The U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division

Disability Rights Section
Disability Rights Section
P.O. Box 66738
Washington, D.C. 20035-6738
(800) 514-0301 Voice
(800) 514-0383 TTY
Web site:
www.usdoj.gov/disabilities.htm

Part II

What is an Assistive Listening Device?

Assistive Listening Devices (ALDs) are any technology developed to enhance the abilities of a person who has a hearing loss. These devices can be used with a television set, in small gatherings, in class or meeting rooms, and in venues such as auditoriums, churches, lecture halls, and theaters.

What does it do?

Assistive Listening Devices amplify sound. Because these devices frequently tap directly into the source of the sound by using a microphone directed at the stage or by connecting into the sound-board/mixer, they also appear to clarify sound by cutting down or eliminating ambient noise. But the primary job of the ALD is to make the sound louder and to give volume control to the individual.

Who uses Assistive Listening Devices?

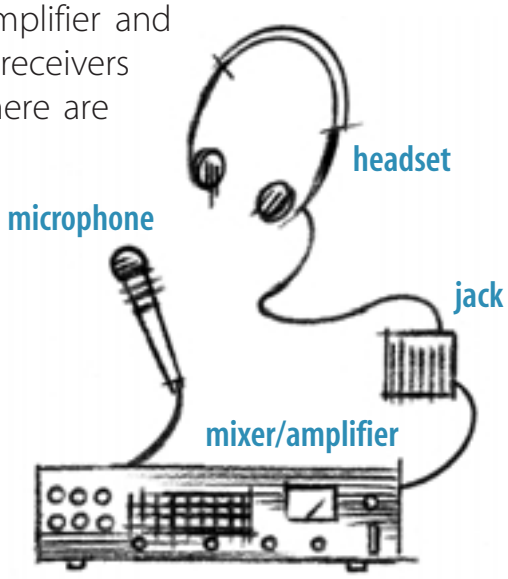
One in eleven individuals experience some level of hearing loss. In America, an estimated 24 million people have a hearing loss. Of these, approximately 19 million have some residual hearing that enables them to benefit from the use of assistive listening devices — 15 million people who can benefit from the use of ALDs do not use hearing aids and 4 million use hearing aids. *Sources: SHHH and the Hearing Journal Census Bureau 1997 survey, The United States Architectural & Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, Data on Disability, National Health Interview Survey for 1983-1985.*

ALDs are usually effective at providing access for people with mild to moderate hearing loss. For individuals who are deaf or have a more severe hearing loss theaters should work with members of the deaf and hard of hearing commu-

nity to explore other means of providing effective communication such as captioning and/or sign language interpreting.

How do Assistive Listening Devices Work?

There are two modes of transmitting sound: radio waves and infrared waves and four types of systems. All systems include a microphone, a mixer/amplifier, a transmitter, receiver, and headset. The mixer/amplifier and transmitter/emitter are frequently one unit. The receivers may or may not have built in headsets and there are several kinds of adapters.



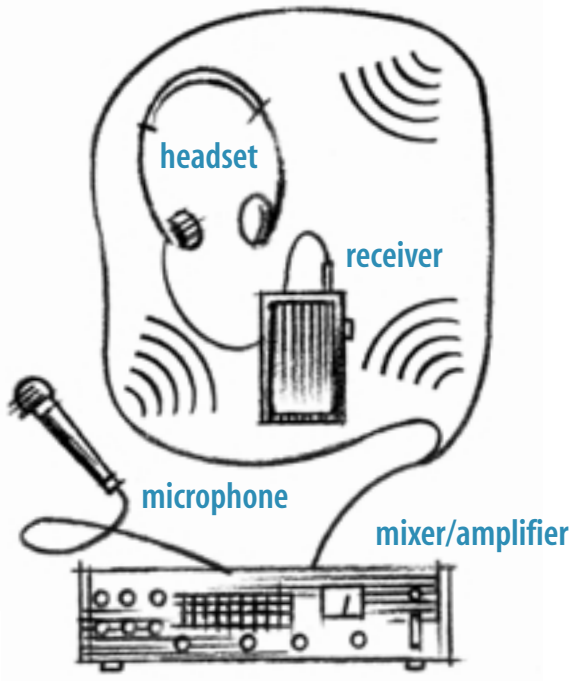
Definition of Four Systems

1 Hardwire System

The hardwire system is a closed system in which the sound is never broadcast outside of the cables. This is the type of system used in airplanes where the headset is plugged directly into the jack at your seat.

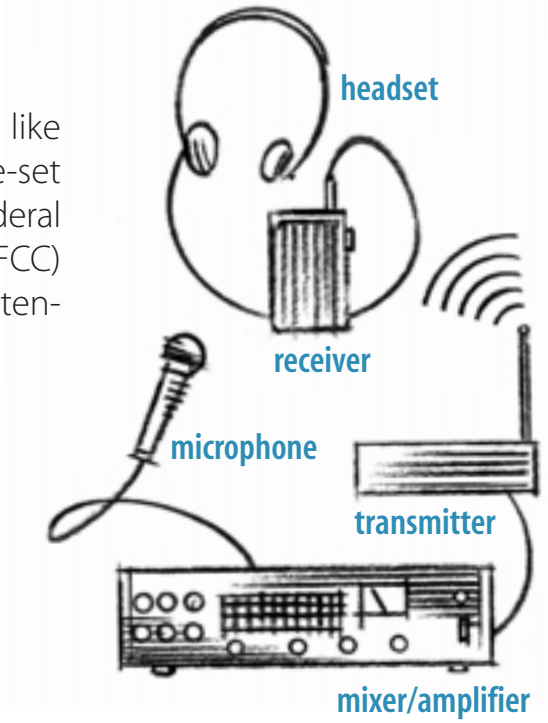
2 Induction Loop System

The induction loop system broadcasts electromagnetic current within an area encompassed by a big directional cable antenna. To get amplification an individual must be seated within the area that the cable circles.



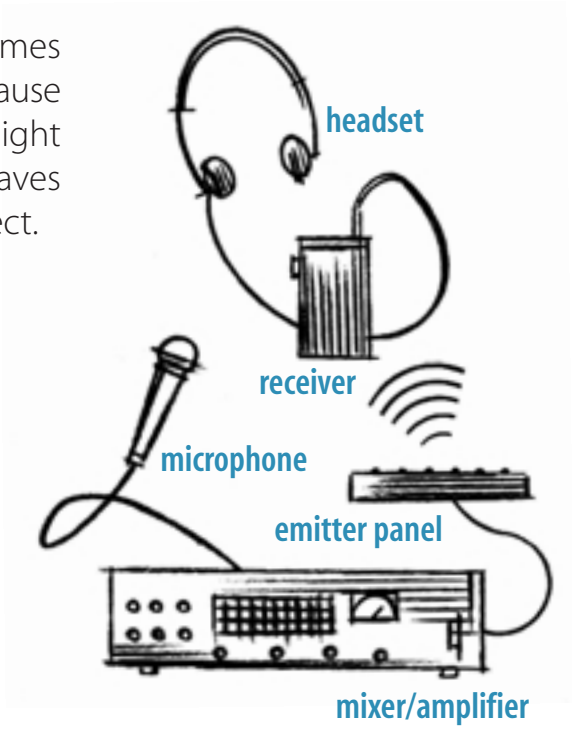
❸ FM System

The FM system operates just like a small radio station with pre-set frequencies restricted by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for use primarily by assistive listening devices.



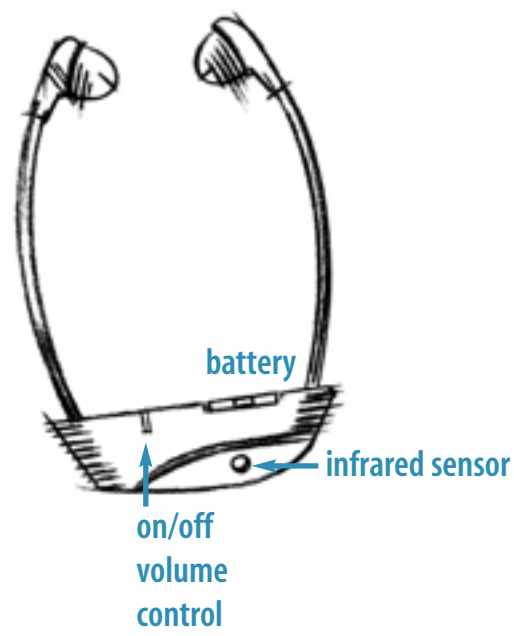
❹ Infrared System

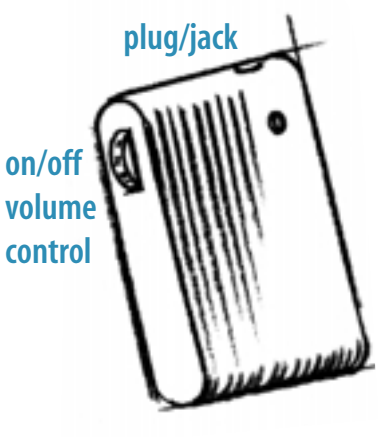
The infrared system is sometimes called a "line of sight" system because the receiver must be in line of sight of the emitter since infrared waves will not go through a solid object.

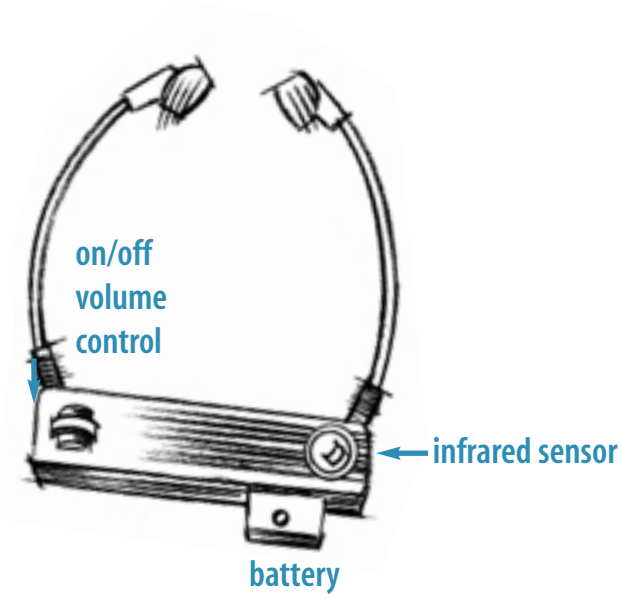


What is an ALD?

Types of Receivers





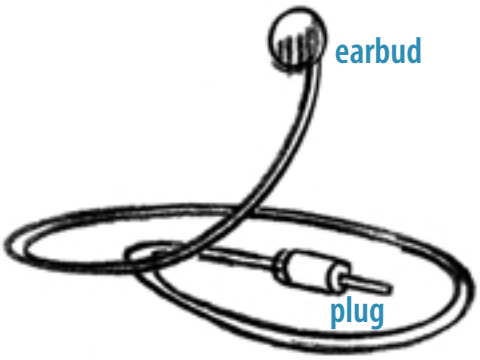


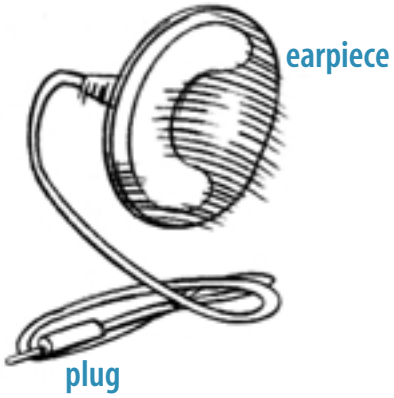
Types of headsets and adapters

Different people prefer and benefit from different types of headsets and adapters. Have a variety available so that your patrons can choose the type of receiver and headset combination that ensures they will get full benefit from the assistive listening devices (ALD).

❶ Monaural headset

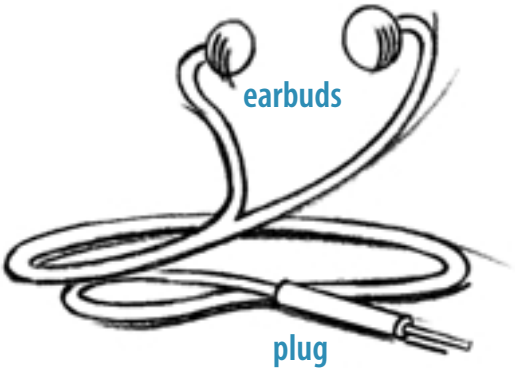
A headset with one earbud. It covers or is inserted into one ear.





❷ Binaural headset

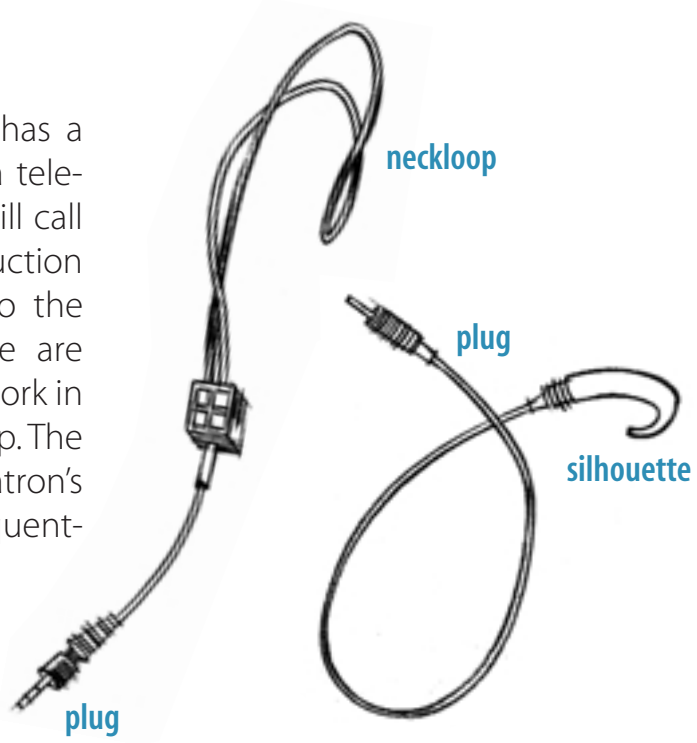
A headset with two earbuds. It covers both ears. Sometimes binaural headsets are monaural instead of stereo, thus receiving only half of the broadcast information.



What is an ALD?

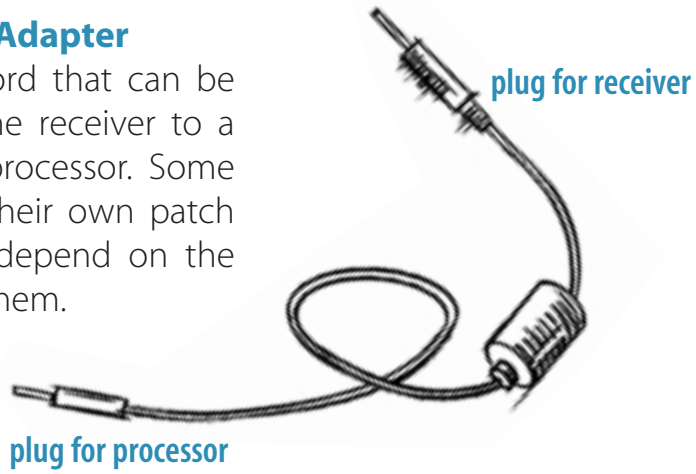
3 Induction neckloop

Used only by a person who has a hearing aid with a T-switch (a telecoil switch — some people will call it a telephone switch). The induction neckloop transmits directly to the individuals hearing aid. There are also silhouette adapters that work in the same way as the neck loop. The silhouette goes behind the patron's ear but these are not used frequently in theater environments.



4 Cochlear Implant Adapter

There is a patch cord that can be used to connect the receiver to a patron's cochlear processor. Some people may have their own patch cords; others may depend on the theater to provide them.



Part III

Things to Consider Before Purchasing Assistive Listening Devices

- **Portability:** Will the system be permanently installed or will it be portable? Some systems lend themselves to being moved from space to space. Portable systems can come with a charger that looks like a large briefcase that both stores and re-charges the receivers. FM systems tend to be the easiest to use if they are being moved from space to space.

- **Physical obstructions:** Obstructions such as support pillars, walls, deeply recessed boxes, or balcony overhangs can block an infrared signal. In spaces with lots of physical obstructions, there may be a need to have more emitter panels to improve reception with an infrared system. FM signals may experience minor interference from physical obstructions; the interference is usually not significant enough to affect quality of sound.

- **Interference:** Electromagnetic, light, and radio signals can cause interference to FM and/or infrared signals. For example, infrared systems are less effective in environments that are brightly lit with natural or fluorescent light. FM systems can pick up other FM transmissions if the channels are close to one another on the spectrum of potential channels.

- **Overlap:** Facilities with multiple venues may experience overlapping FM signals if more than one system is being used simultaneously on the same channel.

Before Purchasing

- **Size:** Selecting an appropriate transmitter or emitter for the size of the theater or venue is very important.
  - There are small FM transmitters developed for use in classrooms which are adequate if the receiver is never farther than 25 to 30 feet from the transmitters. Large FM transmitters usually can cover anywhere from 200 to 500 feet and can be boosted with the use of a more powerful antenna.
  - There are small and large infrared emitters that cover different ranges. It is important to have a knowledgeable person assist with determining the size and quantity of emitters necessary to adequately cover a performance space.

- **Location:** The location of the transmitter or emitters is very important to the quality of the sound.
  - Infrared emitters are directional. Think of an emitter as transmitting light in a cone that radiates out from the emitter panel. Anything outside of that cone will not receive the transmission. A sound technician/contractor experienced with infrared systems can maximize the coverage by an emitter and determine exactly how many emitter panels will be needed to cover a specific area. Two of the most frequent mistakes made with infrared devices are not purchasing enough emitters to cover the area and not maximizing the coverage by positioning the emitters correctly.

- Because FM systems are less discriminating when it comes to directionality, placement of the transmitter is usually less crucial. But proper placement can enhance the quality of the sound. The more objects that the signal has to go through to reach the receiver, the more it can become distorted. Think about how the radio reception in your car is affected when you go through a tunnel. Placing the transmitter or the antenna for the transmitter at the front of the theater facing the audience will maximize reception. Antennas and transmitters in the back of the theater or behind the audience will be less effective.

Additional Information:

"Demystifying Assistive Listening Devices" 1999
By Cheryl D. Davis, Ph.D
A comprehensive "slide show" describing in more detail how ALDs work. This is an excellent resource to review before purchasing equipment.

Northwest Outreach Center
Regional Resource Center on Deafness
Western Oregon University
davisc@wou.edu
www.wosc.osshe.edu/education/sped/nwoc/demyst/

Part IV

After You Have Purchased Your Assistive Listening Devices

Once you have invested in an assistive listening system it makes good common sense to plan for maintenance and to train your staff to assist patrons. There is probably nothing more frustrating than to look forward to a delightful evening at the theater only to find that you cannot hear what is being said because the battery on your ALD is not charged, someone forgot to turn on the system, or the staff does not know where the equipment is kept.

How to clean and store the equipment

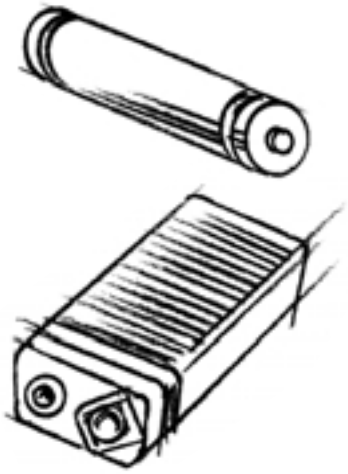
Keeping the earbuds (the parts that go in or over the ears) clean is important for health and safety reason. Many earbuds are made of hard plastic that can be carefully swabbed with alcohol wipes or have throwaway rubber or foam covers that can simply be replaced after each use.

Some ALDs can be purchased with a storage case. In FM systems these look like a large briefcase that doubles as storage and battery charger. Otherwise you will want to keep your equipment in a dry, temperate, dust-free place where it is not going to get damaged. Be sure to store headsets and adapters in such a way that wires do not get tangled, twisted, and mangled.

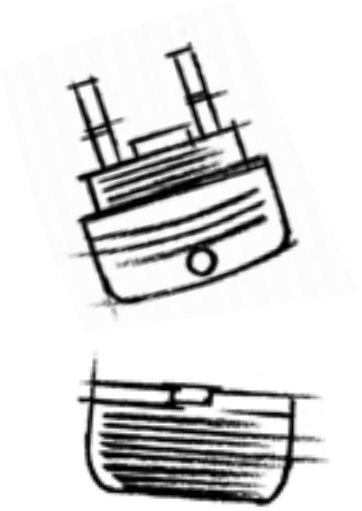
How to Maintain the Batteries

Batteries are the power supply for all receivers and some small portable ALD transmitters. Generally batteries are a commonly ignored but essential component of a well-functioning Assistive Listening System. They are frequently the source of trouble in the system. Understanding how the batteries work will keep the system functioning smoothly.

- **Non-Rechargeable Batteries**
  This type of battery, an alkaline battery, is usually found in household items like flashlights and toys. These batteries are normally not rechargeable and once discharged are useless. It is unsafe to try and recharge a standard alkaline battery. The advantage of non-rechargeable batteries is that they are inexpensive and readily available. However, not all assistive listening devices can use non-rechargeable batteries.



- **Rechargeable Batteries**
  A common rechargeable battery used to power receivers and small portable ALD transmitters are nickel-cadmium batteries (NiCad or Ni-Cd.). These batteries:
  - cost more than alkaline batteries,
  - do not need to be replaced as frequently,
  - require specialized recharging units,
  - have a memory. Some newer NiCad batteries do not have a memory.



After Purchasing

It is the "memory" that is least understood and often misused. To get the most out of a receiver or transmitter that is powered by this type of battery, it is important to understand how the memory in the battery works.

For example: If the battery is discharged so that only 25% of its charge is left and then it is charged back to 100%, when it is used next it will only discharge to that 25% level. The battery remembers to what level it was previously discharged. The result, in this case, is that your battery is only 75% as effective as it was when first bought. This cycle keeps continuing each time the battery is discharged until you may have a battery that you think is fully recharged yet is only minimally recharged. The duration of time the receiver (or small transmitter) can be used depends on carefully monitoring the discharge-recharge cycle.

How to Get the Most from NiCAD Rechargeable Batteries

1. Discharge the battery completely before recharging it. To discharge the battery completely, leave it in the unit (receiver or transmitter) with the unit "on" until the unit is dead (12 to 24 hours is more than enough).
2. Once the battery is completely discharged turn the unit off and remove the battery. Plug the battery into the recharging unit and recharge it for 14 to 24 hours. Some devices are designed so that the entire receiver or transmitter is plugged into the recharging unit without removing the battery. Always recharge the battery at least 14 hours so that it will be completely recharged. Never recharge it for longer than 24 hours because it may cause damage to the battery.
3. Heat may damage the batteries, so avoid leaving them in direct sunlight or very hot spaces.

How to Coordinate an In-house Assistive Listening Receiver Distribution System

Training your staff is an important part of offering ALDs. Technical staff must ensure that the system is turned on and working for every performance or event. Ushers and front-of-house staff must know that the theater has ALDs, where the equipment is, how to operate it, what to do if something is not working, and how to clean and store it properly so it doesn't get damaged. In addition, be sure the distribution location for the equipment is clearly identified with signs.

The following is a sample instruction sheet for ushers, staff, and/or volunteers who are responsible for distributing assistive listening receivers.

Instructions

1. Be sure the assistive listening system is turned on in the theater.

2. Check the receivers to ensure that they are working before being handed out. (The sound system in the theater must be turned on to be able to check for working receivers.)
   - **FM System**
     Plug a headset into the receiver and turn it on (all-in-one receivers do not require a headset). Listen for the sound of "white noise." This is a sound in the background similar to what you hear if your radio is not tuned to a station. If there is sound or pre-show music playing in the auditorium, you will hear it through the device.
   - **Infrared System**
     Go into the theater where the system is installed*. Plug a headset into the receiver and turn it on (all-in-one receivers do not require a headset). Listen for the sound of "white noise." This is a sound in the background similar to what you hear if your radio is not tuned to a station. If there is sound or pre-show music playing in the auditorium you will hear it through the device.

After Purchasing

- **Common Problems**
  If there is no white noise and/or pre-show music, check for the following:
  - Jack is not plugged firmly into the receiver; push the jack in until it clicks (skip this step for all-in-one receivers that do not have a separate headset)
  - Headset or receiver is defective; try a different headset or receiver.
  - Volume is too low; turn up the volume on the receiver.
  - Battery is loose; push the battery in firmly or replace the battery.
  - Battery is dead; replace the battery.
  - After trying all of the above, and if **all** of the receivers seem to be dead, check again to see that the system has been turned on by the stage or sound crew.

**It is possible to purchase a small infrared emitter or FM transmitter on the same frequency as the emitters and transmitter in the theater. Keep the small transmitter or emitter with the receivers and use it to test the receivers so that you don't have to run in and out of the theater to see if the receiver is working.*

3. Hand the receivers out to the patrons.
- Ask them what *kind of headset or adapter they prefer*.
  - **Monaural headset** — a headset with one earbud. It only covers one ear.
  - **Binaural headset** — a headset with two earbuds. It covers both ears.
  - **Induction neckloop or silhouette** — used only by a person who has a *hearing aid with a T-switch* (a telecoil switch — some people will call it a telephone switch). The neckloop or silhouette works by transmitting directly to the individuals hearing aid
    - The neckloop plugs into the receiver and hangs around the patron's neck. The silhouette goes behind the patrons hearing aid.
    - When the T-switch of the patrons hearing aid is "on" the loop transmits the sound directly to the hearing aid.
    - Testing the neckloop or silhouette to ensure it is working requires a hearing aid with a T-switch. It is best to ask the patron to try it before the show starts and let you know if it is not working.

- **Cochlear Implant Adapter** — there is a patch cord that can be used to connect the receiver to a patron's cochlear processor. Some people may have their own patch cords.

4. Explain how the receiver works:
- The headset jack must be plugged all the way in to the receiver.
- The volume switch must be turned on and can be set at whatever level the patron finds comfortable.
- If it is a multi-channel receiver, be sure it is set to the correct channel. Some receivers can operate on several different channels, providing greater use for the equipment in the theatre.
- The receivers can be temperamental. Jiggling, squeezing, and/or dropping them can cause the connections to become loose and affect reception.
- If it is an **FM receiver**: the wire leading from the receiver to the earpiece acts as the antenna; the straighter and less tangled this is, the better the reception.
- If it is an **Infrared receiver**: the glass "eye" must be facing the stage; not turned around towards the patrons chest, or blocked by clothing, hair, or hands.

Collecting Identification: The decision on whether to collect ID as collateral to ensure the return of the receiver, or not, is up to the individual theater. Theaters may *not* charge deaf or hard of hearing patrons for using the receivers. Many theaters require patrons to leave some form of ID (such as a credit card, drivers license or other ID that has the patrons name embossed on it) in exchange for the receiver. This helps to ensure that the patron will remember to return the receiver at the end of the performance. If the theater elects to collect IDs, every precaution should be taken to ensure that these are secured and not vulnerable to theft. Some theaters do not want the responsibility of holding IDs and instead collect the patron's name, seating location, and home or business phone number. This can help to locate the patron later if they do forget to return the receiver at the end of the performance. Some theaters collect nothing and just remind patrons to return the receivers.

After Purchasing

5. At intermission, be sure that staff is available at the distribution area to assist patrons who have had problems with their receivers during the performance. Exchange the faulty receiver for a different one that has been carefully checked out. Make a note and tell appropriate staff what was reported to be wrong with the receiver.

6. At the end of the performance, return to the distribution area to collect the receivers. Ask them if they had any problems with the receiver and if they did, note down the specific problem. For example: "The patron wasn't getting sound out of the left earpiece" or "Patron complained of static." Be sure this information gets to the appropriate staff so that that receiver can be checked out, repaired, or replaced. Having forms available to make a full report on the faulty receivers is very useful.

Part V

Directory of Manufacturers and Vendors

The following is a list of manufacturers and/or suppliers who carry assistive listening devices that are used in facilities and venues like classrooms or theaters. **Disclaimer:** *This is not a comprehensive list nor does inclusion on this list imply any kind of endorsement of the company or product.*

Call the manufacturer or supplier and find a vendor in your area who can sell, install, and help you maintain your equipment. Always get a knowledgeable sound engineer or someone familiar with ALDs to consult or help install the equipment. Poor or improper installation of the equipment can render it useless. Some manufacturers will sell directly to the public and some will not. (M=Manufacturer, S=Supplier)

All Systems

American Loop Systems (S)
29 Silver Hill Road, Suite 100
Milford, MA 01757
(800) GET-LOOP
(800) 955-7204 TTY
(508) 634-0200 Voice
(617) 666-5228 Fax

Audio Enhancement (S)
1748 West 12613 South Redwood Road
Riverton, UT 84065
(800) 383-9362
(801) 254-9263
(801) 254-3802 Fax

Cardinal Sound & Communication (S)
2317 Kansas Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910
(800) 964-3496
(301) 589-3700
(301) 589-4284 Fax
www.cardinalproaudio.com/

Centrum Sound (S)
572 LaConner Drive
Sunnyvale, CA 94078
(408) 736-6500
(408) 736-6552 Fax
http://members.aol.com/centrumweb/

Directory

Gentner Communications Corporation (M)
1825 West Research Way
Salt Lake City, UT 84119
(800) 945-7730
(801) 974-7200
(801) 977-0087 Fax
www.gentner.com

HARC Mercantile, Ltd. (S)
1111 West Centre Avenue
P. O. Box 3055
Kalamazoo, MI 49033
(800) 445-9968 Voice
(800) 413-5245 TTY
(800) 413-5248 Fax
www.accessolutions.com/index.htm

Hear You Are, Inc. (S)
125 Main Street
Netcong, NJ 07857
(201) 347-0006
(888) 532-HEAR
www.eclipse.net/~synergy/hearyouare.html

HITEC (S)
8160 Madison Avenue
Burr Ridge, IL 60521
(800) 288-8303 voice
(800) 536-8890 TTY
www.hitec.com/hitec.html

Phonic Ear, Inc. (M)
3880 Cypress Drive
Petaluma, CA 95954
(707) 769-1110
(800) 227-0735
(707) 769-9624 Fax
www.phonicear.com

Potomac Technology (S)
1 Church Street, #101
Rockville, MD 20850-4194
(800) 433-2838
(301) 762-4005
www.potomactech.com

FM and Infrared Systems Only

Listen Technologies Corporation (M)
P.O. Box 683010
Park City, UT 84068-3010
(800) 330-0891
(435) 647-0318
(435) 647-0316 Fax
www.listentech.com

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(510) 652-5075 Fax
www.nadywireless.com

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Old Lyme, CT 06371
(860) 434-9190
www.sennheiserusa.com

Williams Sound (M)
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(503) 684-3197 Fax
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www.siemens-hearing.com

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